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THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE:--HOW IT HAS BEEN UNDERSTOOD, ATTACKED, AND DEFENDED.

This essay is intended as an introduction to our studies in the area of the doctrine of Scripture during the coming school year. In this paper, we wish to get an overview of the situation so that we may be able to view things in perspective.

In gathering the material for this essay, I have found that I had accepted a larger topic than I had bargained for. The material seems to be endless, and the time is definitely limited.

I. The Inerrancy Of Scripture:--How It Has Been Understood.

The inerrancy of the Scripture appears always to have been a necessary deduction from the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scripture. By and large, the inerrancy of Scripture was believed by the Jews, at the time of Christ, and by nearly all the Church fathers. But though there are evidences that they believed the Bible to be inerrant, they do not seem to have talked about it to the extent that we do today. It was really only when the inerrancy of Scripture was attacked from within the Church itself, that the dogmatists got worried about it, that the topic began to assume the proportions which it assumes for us today.

When Celsus attacked the Church during the second century of the Christian era, he did not attack what he considered individual errors or discrepancies in Scripture, for instance in historical or geographical statements. He brutally attacked the whole Scripture

as being the product of superstition, as being ridiculous from the standpoint of reason, and vicious from the standpoint of ethics. With all the weapons of philosophy he tried to destroy the Scripture as a whole. Attacks on the Scripture from within the Church, for the most part, did not occur until much later. However, it will be well for us to remember that the ancient Church had its Theodore of Mopsuestia. This man, who lived and wrote about the time of St. Augustine, contradicted the commonly held doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scripture, and with it, its perfection and inerrancy. According to Rohnert,¹ he taught that the Book of Job was a poem which had originated within heathenism. He calls the Song of Songs a dreary bridal song, possessing neither prophetic, nor historical, nor didactic quality. He said that the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes contain good teaching but that Solomon did not possess the gift of prophesy, of revelation, but merely the gift of human wisdom. Rohnert² says that in his exposition of the prophets and of the psalms, Theodore treated them as purely human and approached them from a historical viewpoint in order to delete the messianic import entirely, much like modern criticism in our own day. Needless to say, later enemies of the doctrine of inspiration within the Church are very high on this man. To complete the picture, we must add that Theodore of Mopsuestia was later on condemned as a heretic for this abberation and for heresies with respect to the person of Christ. After Theodore, there seems to be no outstanding example of men within the Church seeking to point up errors in Scripture until we come to the time of the

Reformation, which brought forth not only Luther and Zwingli, but also Faustus and Laelius Socinus and men of like stamp. The founders of the Socinian cult wanted to allow only that in Scripture to have authority which contained nothing that contradicted reason or was incomprehensible to reason, for they held that that could in no way be true, which contradicted reason and the common understanding of men. An attitude somewhat similar to that of the Socinians was later held by many of the Arminians. Their theologian, Episkopius, assumed that the Holy writers might have committed slips of memory also in the Scripture, but he counseled that if a pious interpretation can solve the difficulty it should be done.

I am assuming that Luther's position with respect to the inerrancy of Scripture is too well known to need a long discussion here. Rohnert, it seems to me, has very well summarized Luther's position when he says that Luther assumed no errors or contradictions in Scripture. He considered Scripture true in its entirety and worthy of faith even in the most trivial matters, also in matters of natural history, chronology and so forth. Even where it seems to be in error, it is nevertheless trustworthy. If it is impossible by means of human reason to harmonize passages that seem to be in conflict, a person is to tip his hat to the Scripture and let it be. For, Luther holds, he who rejects part of Scripture must reject also the whole. Rohnert quotes the following from Luther: "The saints were able to err in their writings and to sin in their lives; Scripture cannot err." Luther did not mind on occasion

to blame seeming discrepancies in Scripture on the copyists. He says: "The time of the judges from the death of Moses to Samuel is 357 years, including Joshua as you yourself can see and the figures are not wrong, because in the first Book of Kings, Chapter VI, he counts from the exodus till the Temple of Solomon, 480 years. Therefore, it is a manifest error in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter XIII, Verse 20, brought in by copyists, and the Latin version is false twice, because it alleges 450 years from the judges up to the time of the distribution of the land and therefore forces Lyra to go back to the time of Isaac, but the Greek text has been corrupted through the copyists error, which could easily happen. He wrote 450 for 350. In this manner, Luther often seeks to harmonize Bible difficulties. At times, he does not manage, and if he cannot do it he refuses to worry about it. He always assumes that there could be a copyist's error. He will not accuse the Holy Spirit, whom he acknowledges to be the author of all Scripture, ever to have erred.

The Lutheran dogmaticians set forth the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture at great length, and then listed a number of attributes of Holy Scripture, which in large part followed from the fact of its inspiration. These attributes were quite generally, (A) authority; (B) perfection or sufficiency; (C) perspicuity; (D) efficacy. As we might expect, any expressions with respect to the infallibility of Scripture would come under point B, the perfection or sufficiency of Scripture. Heinrich Schmid, in his doctrinal theology of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is really made up of short summary paragraphs on the separate doctrines, with voluminous quotations from the various Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century says in the paragraph which he himself wrote on the perfection or sufficiency of Scripture: "From the fact that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it necessarily follows that all that is contained in them is perfectly true. Page 64. But he makes it clear that generally when the dogmaticians spoke of the perfection of Scripture they meant its sufficiency, namely that the way of life is perfectly taught in the Holy Scriptures.

Hollaz distinguishes between the perfection of Scripture in reference to the subject matter and in reference to the form. It is under the perfection of the form that he says, that no error has crept into the authentic text by the negligence or perfidy of transcribers.

While the earlier Lutheran dogmaticians do not seem to discuss the inerrancy of Scripture at any great length, Quenstedt, who as is known, is later than John Gerhard poses the question: "Is the Holy Scripture infallibly true and free from every error?" He answers the question as follows: "The canonical Scripture in the original text is infallibly true and free of every error." If Schmid is a safe guide in this matter, we must say that the emphasis on the inerrancy of the Scripture is not particularly heavy in the earlier Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century.

We shall show later that this picture changed, beginning with Abraham Calov, the contemporary of Quenstedt, who already seems to stress the inerrancy of Scripture more than had the predecessors of both. It is supposed that this was due to the fact that Georg Calixt had wavered in the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, though he does not seem to have openly claimed that there were errors in Scripture.

Other targets of Calovius' polemics in the matter of the inerrancy of Scripture were the Roman Catholic Pighius and in particular the Socinians. On this subject Robert Preus says³:

"Among the opponents of the Lutheran doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture was the Catholic theologian Albert Pighius, who held that the evangelists could forget and even prevaricate when they wrote Scripture. They did not see what they wrote about Christ, he argues, but merely followed the reports of others. Erasmus too had taught that the memory of the evangelists was not always accurate. But it was mainly the Socinians who prompted these outbursts on the part of the dogmaticians. The Socinians believed that it was not necessary for Scripture to be infallible or inerrant. In his Socinianus Profligatus, which was a polemic against Socinianism in general, Abraham Calov bitterly attacks this view as utterly un-Christian, and conducive to scepticism and even atheism. Calov offers a number of reasons why we must at all costs uphold the inerrancy of Scripture. Scripture is the source of all our knowledge

of revealed theology and must therefore remain infallible or we can gain no certainty of faith or assurance of salvation. But our faith is immovable and certain, and this fact alone shows that its source is also infallible. The Socinians teach that the truth of Scripture is only probable. The consequences of such a view are disastrous. That there is a Christ, that Jesus is the Messiah, that we may hope for a life after death, nay, even that there is a God, is only probable. The consequences of such a heresy are simple Pyrrhonism, scepticism and ultimately atheism. If Scripture is not certain there can be no real certainty of forgiveness of sins or the grace of God, God is made responsible for man's unbelief or lack of spiritual knowledge, and the efficacy of the Gospel to bring about faith in its own message is denied.

But the Socinians not only admitted the possibility of errors creeping into Scripture; they taught that the evangelists and apostles on many occasions had lapses of memory and actually fell into error. Again Calov attacks such a pernicious and false opinion. The writers of Scripture did not write of human volition, but 'hypou pneumatatos hagiou feromenos', as hands and penmen of the Holy Spirit. Under His activation they were incapable of error or forgetfulness. Or, to put it more accurately, the Holy Spirit who wrote through them was unable to forget or make mistakes. Since the doctrine and even all the words in Scripture are not the doctrines and words of men

but of God, there can be no possibility of untruth in Scripture, for God cannot lie (Heb. 4. 18)."

Reformed dogmatics appears to run parallel to Lutheran dogmatics in this matter during the 17th century, Heinrich Heppe, who has done for Reformed dogmatics what Heinrich Schmid did for Lutheran dogmatics does not indicate that the Reformed dogmaticians of the 17th century discussed the inerrancy of Scripture at any great length. He says on page 26: "Since the authority of Holy Scripture coincides with the authority of God, it is essentially an absolute authority. At the same time there is founded on the contents of Scripture, a distinction in its authority. So far as everything that Scripture recounts is absolutely certain historical truth, it possesses historical authority or authenticity but so far as it contains the absolute divine norms of faith and life, it possesses normative authority or authenticity. From this it is clear that the historical stretches further than the normative authority. The former applies to the entire content of Scripture, the latter on the contrary only to part of it, since what Scripture relates of the works, words and thoughts of the devil and the Godless has historical authority but not normative." They give similar quotations from other reformed dogmaticians on succeeding pages.

II. The Inerrancy Of Scripture:--How It Has Been Attacked.

Already during the earlier part of this paper we had to refer to individual attacks on the inerrancy of Scripture, the intemperate and vicious attack of Celsus, which came from without the Church,

from heathenism during the second century of the Christian era, and attacked the very foundations of Scripture, and then the rather isolated attack of a higher critical nature by one of the Church's own Bishops, namely Theodore of Mopsuestia.

However, the real attack, ostensibly from within the Church, came at the time of Rationalism or the so-called Enlightenment.

Rationalism, as we here speak of it really had its origin in philosophy, which had taken an anti-Scriptural turn in England during the 17th century with the so-called Deists. This had been transplanted to France, where it helped to bring on the French revolution, with the attempted dethronement of the Scripture and of God himself, and the enthronement of the goddess of reason. It sprang over into Germany, and entered into the Church where it was known as rationalism. Gaußen in his book, The Plenary Inspiration Of The Scripture on page 202 and following, gives an example of how some rationalists treat the Scripture. He has a rationalist say: "St. Paul speaks of having delivered an incestuous person over to Satan. Could this passage (fanatical no doubt) have been inspired? He tells them that we shall judge angels. A gnostic reverie, no doubt. Could such a passage be inspired? He even goes so far as to tell them that in consequence of their unworthy communions, many of them are sick and some are dead. This passage cannot be inspired. And when St. Paul assures the Thessalonians which St. James repeats, that the coming of the Lord draweth nigh, could so manifest an error be inspired?"

It is evident that this particular rationalist denied at least that many passages in Scripture are inspired. However, the outcome of rationalism was not so much that the inspiration of some passages was denied while that of others was maintained, but that the whole concept of inspiration was changed. The rationalists, notably Semler in Halle (died 1791) emptied the doctrine of inspiration as it had been understood and taught in orthodoxy of its content, and substituted a doctrine of inspiration which assumed error, misunderstanding, and even pious fraud in the Scripture. Out of rationalism came the higher historical and literary criticism, which took possession of Biblical Isagogics and laid the foundation for the denial of inspiration and inerrancy of the Scripture which we find in so much of the Church today.

The rationalists were not without their antagonists within the Church both Lutheran and Reformed. The Lutheran Church produced a Hengstenberg and a host of lesser theologians who stoutly resisted rationalism. By and large however, the theologians both within Lutheranism and within the Reformed communions, with not too many exceptions, were influenced to this extent by rationalism, that, while they maintain the divine inspiration of the Scripture, and sought to maintain the truth of the Gospel and of the way of salvation as set forth in the Protestant confessions, they no longer maintained the strict doctrine of verbal inspiration that had been held during the period of orthodoxy. Perhaps the German theologian Volk can serve as an example of what theologians who did

not consider themselves rationalists, but so-called conservative German theologians thought of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture after the age of rationalism. Volk says, as quoted by Rohnert:

"The Bible is divine and human; divine, because it came into existence through self-activity of the Spirit of God and expresses the thoughts of God; human, because it has been written by men, and expresses human thought, will, and feelings of its authors. If then the Bible is a work of God composed by men, it follows that it is relatively subject to err. Who for instance, has not discovered the differences in the gospels between the individual evangelists, which cannot be removed by any kind of harmonizing, and which one ought rather to admit than to have them cast in his teeth constantly by his opponents. But how far does this proneness to error go? What is its boundary? The answer to this question is given by the sentence which says that the Bible is the primary document of the history of salvation. If it is this, if it expresses the eternal thoughts of God concerning the salvation of men, revealed historically, then we must admit that it is subject to error in all those things which do not belong into the area of the history of salvation or being entirely non-essential do not in any way touch the substance of the history of salvation."⁴

This paragraph, written more than half a century ago, expresses very accurately what many so-called conservative theologians within Protestantism think about the Bible today. They frankly have a Bible which erred and in which they can point out errors of an historical, geographical and scientific nature, and perhaps other errors as well, particularly in the area of ethics. Some of the best theologians of Lutheran name in Germany today will say that there are three areas in which they cannot accept the inerrancy

of Scripture, (A) with respect to what they call das alte Weltbild. (B) die Rachepsalmen; and (C) minor errors in history, geography and the like.

III. The Inerrancy Of Scripture:--How It Has Been Defended.

If the Bible has in past ages had its enemies and detractors, it always had also its friends and defenders. When the heathen Celsus ruthlessly attacked the Scripture at its very foundations, the Church father, Origen, critically analyzed Celsus' attacks, and refuted them in a very admirable manner in the book Contra Celsum. The book deserves reading to this day.

When Theodore of Mopsuestia, though a Bishop within the Church, attacked the Scripture, he was condemned as a heretic. When the rationalists during the 18th and 19th centuries attacked the Scripture, defenders of the sacred book arose also at that time. Many apologetic works were written, and many theological works which were not in the first instance of an apologetic nature nevertheless contained much apologetic material. I would like, however, at this point to refer to a special type of book, namely the books that listed the so-called errors which men claim to have found in the Scriptures and answered the objections one by one. One such book, Hailey, Alleged Discrepancies Of The Bible, published by Warren F. Draper at Austin in 1876 has recently been reissued, apparently by using the original plates from which the first edition was published. It is issued with the note that it is still the best book along this

line. It is a book of more than 400 pages. It lists every kind of alleged discrepancy that the author could find, and he answers all criticisms painstakingly one by one. Something similar, though on a smaller scale had been done by Gausen, The Plenary Inspiration of the Scripture, pages 153 to 348. He examines the objections to the inerrancy of the Scripture and answers them.

Dr. Pieper treats the arguments against the inerrancy of Scripture, not perfection of Scripture, as we might expect, but as part of the doctrine of inspiration. He lists as objections which have been raised: (1) The different style in the various books of Scripture; (2) the appeal of the Holy writers to their historical research; (3) the variant readings found in the copies of the originals; (4) the alleged contradictions in Scripture and erroneous statements in general; (5) alleged inaccurate quotations from the Old Testament, solecisms and barbarisms in language. Then there are the books like the one referred to before by Haley which are devoted entirely to a defense of Scripture against its unbelieving and half-believing critics. Haley says that the works exclusively devoted to the discussion and harmonization of the alleged discrepancies in Scripture are few in number and of comparatively remote date. The remote date is very interesting. I count in his bibliography thirty-seven books that discuss the discrepancies. The oldest one is by a man who lived 680 A.D.. The book itself was published in 1530. It is entitled Antikeimenoon, sive contrariorum in speciem locorum utriusque Testimenti, libri duo. It was published at Basle in 1530,

reprinted at Cologne in 1533 and 1540, and at Paris in 1556. The other books mostly in Latin, but one also in Spanish, therefore probably by a Roman Catholic, were published respectively in 1527, 1527, 1556, 1556, 1563, 1563, 1587, 1600, 1601, 1625, 1626, 1632, 1663, 1662, 1645, 1654, 1654, 1662, 1671, 1675, 1675, 1676, 1683, 1695, 1698, 1705, 1713, 1775, 1791, 1792, with six after the year 1800. The titles are very similar. If one wanted to choose a characteristic one it would be Conciliationes locorum S. Scripturae in specie pugnantium.

It is quite evident that already at the time of the reformation men were well aware that there are passages in Scripture that seem to contradict each other, and that men were busily engaged in harmonizing them. Luther did a certain amount of this in his exegetical work. These labors continued throughout the period of orthodoxy. This was not a sign that the inerrancy of Scripture was denied, but that the Church was conscious of certain difficulties. Haley, whose own book, which we have mentioned, wrote in the second half of the 19th century, therefore with the efforts of the rationalists and their successors already in the past. He complains that hitherto there has been no single treatise in our language which could be said to discuss the subject as thoroughly and minutely as its importance required. So Haley undertook the work, gathered many anti-Scriptural writings with their accusations of errors in the Scripture, and produced the work which we are discussing.

The books from the time of the Reformation, which Haley lists in his biography are, according to Robert Preus, not so much of an apologetic as of an exegetical nature.

In our own Church two little booklets of this nature were published in the 1920's and 30's, both by Dr. William Arndt. First was Does The Bible Contradict Itself, and the second, Bible Difficulties. In the first volume, Dr. Arndt discusses passages of an historical nature in the Old and in the New Testament, and then passages of a doctrinal nature in the Old and in the New Testament. In the second, he discusses the miracles of the Bible, moral difficulties, historical difficulties, and difficulties from the viewpoint of science. Finally, Dr. Theodore Engelder, in a 498 page volume entitled, Scripture Cannot Be Broken, examines and answers six major objections to verbal inspiration. These objections are essentially the very errors and blemishes which have been alleged in the Scripture ever since the days of Celsus and of the later rationalists. Engelder's major divisions are: (I) Does the Bible contain errors? (II) Has the Bible moral blemishes? (III) Does the Bible deal in trivialities? (IV) The disastrous results of criticizing and correcting Scripture; (V) Is verbal inspiration mechanical inspiration? (VI) Does verbal inspiration imply an atomistic conception and use of Scripture? (VII) Does verbal inspiration establish a legalistic authority of the letter? (VIII) The battle for verbal inspiration.

We have in this brief essay sought to give an overview both of the way in which the inerrancy of the Scripture has been taught in the Church throughout the ages, of the way it has been attacked from without and within, and of the way it has been defended.

In our time, the vast majority of Christian theologians is not well impressed with the literature which seeks to harmonize the seeming discrepancies in the Scripture, and we are told that the cause of the Christian faith is not helped by this kind of work.

To us it seems that this is asking us to give up the battle, and to admit that the enemies of inerrancy have won. To do this would mean to give up very much sound study and very many sound observations that have been and can continue to be of outstanding use and of infinite blessing in the Church. The Church of today, so it seems to us, must continue to fight the battle in behalf of the Scripture, must use for this the excellent weapons that have been forged in the past, and where these weapons were defective and do not suffice today, must forge better ones. This overview of the situation is being given in the hope that we will do our work courageously and well.

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1 Rohnert, W., Die Inspiration der heiligen Schrift und ihre Bestreiter, Leipzig, Verlag von Joh Boehme, 1889. p. 118ff.

2 Op. Cit. p. 120.

3 Preus, Robert, The Inspiration of Scripture, Lutheran Synod Book Company, Mankato, Minnesota, 1955, p. 81f.

4 Op. Cit. p. 263f.